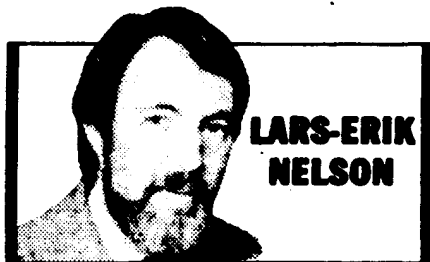


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Stampeding over the border



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WASHINGTON—On Monday morning, there were sketchy reports of a Nicaraguan invasion of Honduras.

Tuesday, President Reagan approved a Honduran request for \$20 million in emergency military aid.

Wednesday, American helicopter pilots went into action, ferrying Honduran troops to the combat area.

Thursday, the Senate was poised to approve \$100 million in aid to the "contra" guerrillas.

There, before you know it, we're engaged in military operations in Central America.

On the basis of what provocation? Suddenly, everything becomes murky.

Did the Sandinista attack really take place as described? It is too late to ask, because the U.S. aid has been approved, American pilots are flying, and there is no going back. U.S. military involvement in Central America has advanced another notch.

Still, if only as an exercise, it might be worth reflecting how we got there.

The first detailed account of the invasion came Tuesday, from State Department spokesman Charles Redman.

On Saturday, March 22, he said, the Sandinistas invaded Honduras. Early

on March 23, "a large Sandinista military force reportedly conducted four assaults in the vicinity of a Nicaraguan refugee center" 10 miles inside Honduras.

"These attacks were reportedly repulsed by New Resistance (contra) student volunteers who were armed that very morning," Redman said. "By late in the evening of March 23, several Sandinista special counter-insurgency battalions were heavily engaged in Honduras. These units normally have 15 to 20 Cuban advisers integrated down to the company level."

There were "1,500 Sandinistas and two task forces participating in the action deep inside Honduras," Redman said. "The Sandinistas supplied their units inside Honduras with heavy artillery fire, volleys of rocket fire from Soviet-made BM-21 multiple rocket launchers and MI-8 gunships."

How do we know all this? Redman acknowledged there were no Americans on the scene to report this invasion. The information came from non-American sources. But not, apparently, from the government of Honduras.

There were no Hondurans in the region either, and Radio Tegucigalpa, the Honduran radio, reported Tuesday that the Honduran government had met "to discuss U.S. charges that Nicaraguan forces entered Honduras."

That leaves as the source of the original detailed report the Nicaraguan contras themselves—particularly, their commander, Enrique Bermudez, a veteran of ex-dictator Anastasio Somoza's National Guard. Bermudez may have been telling the truth—but he has an important self-interest in saying he

was attacked by the Sandinistas: He will be the major beneficiary of the \$100 million in U.S. aid that President Reagan wants to give to the contras.

Bermudez is not the sole source of the information. U.S. electronic and aerial intelligence-gathering picked up signs of a large-scale Sandinista incursion into Honduras, overheard the Sandinistas' radioed requests for help and even spotted some on the Honduran side of the border. Still, the exact size and extent of the incursion remain unclear.

The Pentagon and CIA have indicated it was on a smaller scale than the White House and State Department reported. White House spokesman Larry Speakes said the Pentagon didn't know what it was talking about.

But the point is, in the words of a Capitol Hill staff director, "It is certainly true that whatever aid we've given to Honduras is being given before anybody knows what actually happened."

Reagan's decision was cheered even by some of the Democrats who voted last week against giving \$100 million in aid to the contras. That vote was a reaction in part to the clumsy accusation by White House Communications Director Patrick Buchanan that Democrats who opposed aiding the contras were on the side of the Communists.

EAGER TO PROVE their patriotism, the Democrats—including House Speaker Tip O'Neill—rallied to the side of the President, before they knew what, in fact, had happened on the Honduran border.

This is commendable, no doubt. But it's also how you get stampeded into wars.